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SRY NAGASARY.¹

BY J. F. SCHELTEMA.

ONCE upon a time there was a man, named Kyahy Taboos, who lived in a village near the mouth of a river that flowed from the blue mountains in the interior of one of the Sunda Islands toward the sea. He had four sons: Bagal, a wood-carver; Sompoq, a merchant; Paning, a jeweller; and Mashmool who, being the last-born and favorite, was allowed to follow his natural bent toward music and poetry instead of learning a more useful and profitable trade than that of a merry-andrew as the elder brothers contemptuously called him when discussing his gifts of entertainment. Though brought up in a very religious way and considering themselves of the elect and knowing that the teachings of Batara Guru, the great god, urged man to good-will and kindliness in his dealings with all his fellow-creatures, and especially to love and charity in his relations with his kindred, envy had taken possession of their hearts because their father indulged Mashmool upon whom therefore they looked with eyes of hatred.

So when Kyahy Taboos had been summoned by the gods to receive the amount of his due, Bagal, speaking also for Sompoq and Paning even on the day of their father's burial, said to Mashmool with a lying tongue:

"How dost thou purpose to provide thy share in our means of subsistence? Our father has left us little more than this house in which we live. Thy brother Sompoq buys and sells merchandise at a profit; thy brother Paning is a worker in gold and silver, and a dealer in precious stones, and whatever passes through his hands leaves also substantial gain behind; I am thoroughly acquainted with the nature and qualities of the different kinds of wood and proficient, for the good of our common household, in turning *kayu mahar* into shafts for lances and spears, and into sheaths for krisses, using *kayu kamuning* for the upper parts where the steel touches first in sending the weapon home, improving by skilful carving the design of *kayu pelèt* to enhance the mysterious play of its black and red-brown spots on its luminous grain, a premonition of deeds of darkness and blood, — but thou, what canst thou do to earn thy rice and salt?"

"I am a musician," answered Mashmool, dignified and self-conscious for all his modesty: "I can recite in fitting language what has

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been preserved in our chronicles of ancient wisdom and what they record of high mettle and tender devotion, of virtue and purity in mortals emulating the gods."

"And who cares?" asked Sompoq.

"No one sufficiently to untie his purse-string for accomplishments of the sort," remarked Paning.

"Nor is it incumbent on us to encourage idlers," continued Bagal.

These words were hard to hear and since his brothers persisted in their abusive speech, finding fault with everything he did or left undone, Mashmool resolved to part from them. When he made known his intention to travel and see the wide world and seek his fortune in distant lands, they laid their heads together, discussing how to defraud him of his portion of their father's inheritance, at least how to put him off with a most inadequate payment in cash. But the generous Mashmool, whose mind was not set on worldly considerations, never thought of a settlement; trustful because upright himself, he deemed it quite regular that his brothers should remain in undivided possession of their father's patrimony until his return, an arrangement perfectly agreeable to them. And so, at his departure, with his *suling*¹ under his arm to try his luck as a wandering minstrel, his brothers' farewell with ostentatious wishes for his success in crossing the seven seas and roaming the seven empires, was of the most affectionate description, — touching enough, in fact, to make him search his innocent heart when under way, as to whether perhaps he had done the sons of his father an injustice by doubting their brotherly love. But he walked on.

After Mashmool had gone, the trade of the wicked brothers in their respective occupations began to fall off. It seemed that with him prosperity had turned its back on them. At first they thought that Mashmool, incensed by his treatment at their hands, had sought the assistance of some wizard to obtain revenge through the agency of malevolent spirits, ever prone to mischief and rancorous tricks. To foil these demons they attached strips of white cloth to the roof-corners and other conspicuous parts of their dwelling, a potent means to draw the attention of well-disposed deities to the sinister work of the servants of Evil in the abode of godly men, for so the trio considered themselves, being scrupulously strict in the observance of the ceremonial duties prescribed by their creed, — very godly indeed, provided that godliness did not interfere with their greed.

Their astonishment knew no bounds at noticing, when the pieces of white cloth had been fluttering in the wind for a while, that the host of malignant fiends who had chased off their customers, persisted in pursuing them with ill luck. The men with well-tempered lance and

¹ A flute made of bamboo, with four or sometimes six holes.

spear points to be mounted on strong, flexible shafts, and with beautifully damascened krisses to be further embellished with sheaths of a correct pattern and artistically carved hafts, still passed their door with averted heads to intrust the delicate work to one of Bagal's competitors. The women going to market still avoided the booths of Sompoq and Paning whatever pains they took to attract both matrons and virgins by a cunning display of silk and gold brocade, of ear-rings and bangles and necklaces, jewelry fit for princesses and queens, beyond price yet dirt-cheap if the fair ones only would venture a bid. Putting the blame on the minor deities who neglected to protect Batara Guru's own, Mashmool's brothers never suspected the real cause of the adverse circumstances they had to struggle against, namely, their hardness in their dealings, their rapacity which did not even stop short at cheating and turned people away from them.

One night, after having spent the evening with Sompoq and Paning in their habitual grumbling at the incomprehensible attitude of the rulers of the universe inflicting hardships on the deserving, Bagal had a dream. He fancied himself carving out of wood, and he took special note that it was *kayu nagasary*, the image of an *apsara*, one of the hand-maidens of Indra, that amuse the god by dancing before his throne on Mount Mandara; and when the image was ready, it took life and showered gold on its maker. Marvelling at his vision and not being able to make out its meaning, Bagal told Sompoq and Paning, who did not understand any better than he. They resolved therefore to refer the matter to a saintly hermit with a great reputation for the interpretation of dreams. Charging his usual price for the accustomed offerings to the divine guardians of the secrets of the past, present and future, and keeping them moreover in long suspense while engaged in pressing those lords of the recondite for precise information, the saintly hermit made at last known as Batara Guru's, the upper god's manifest will, revealed by the aforesaid sapient beings after the completion of the sacrifice, that Bagal should do, consciously in his waking state, that which his soul had been made to do without the co-operation of the body. Rich reward would be the result.

So Bagal carved a life-sized image of an *apsara* and it was a fine piece of sculpture and he called it Sry Nagasary after the name of the wood suggested by his dream. Sompoq and Paning, desirous of participating in the promised rich reward, which they construed to mean abundant wealth, clothed the puppet with silk and brocade, and adorned it with jewelry. Bagal, loath to share his good fortune, told them repeatedly that this was not in the dream but as they insisted and were two to his one, he had to acquiesce, pretending with a sour face that he conferred the solicited favor upon them out of the fulness of his brotherly affection. And this display of fraternal disinterestedness be-

came the more fervent the less inclination Sry Nagasary evinced to realize the hopes excited by the saintly hermit's words. Her presence, remarked the brothers to one another, brought no change in their condition, and if they did not know what to think of a world that refused to acknowledge their superior virtue, or of a heaven full of gods whom they lost no opportunity to wheedle into the belief of their obedient piety but who, nevertheless, suffered their neighbors to treat them according to their works rather than according to their professions, neither could they conceive why the saintly hermit had deluded them by a false interpretation of the dream, making them the laughing-stock of the village for the affair had become known and every one ridiculed the credulity of Kyahy Taboos's sons, who expected a wooden image, dressed and bedecked with jewels like a woman of quality, to restore the credit and standing which they had lost by their grasping dishonesty.

When they complained to the saintly hermit and sought redress, they received his assurance that his interpretation of the dream was right.

"You should break yourselves of the bad habit of blaming others for your own faults," he added. "The truth of the *apsara's* failure to gratify your wishes is a long distance beside your surmise. To exercise her functions in discharge of the task assigned to her, she needs not only a human shape, since she is now dwelling among mortals; and clothes for decency's sake, since she is earthly on earth; and garnishment of her beauty, since even a celestial female will strive with might and main to please men — but also music to guide her dancing. Oh that you had not driven away your younger brother, the musician!"

They were surprised and pained by the reproof implied in the saintly hermit's remark and replied somewhat hotly, though he was a holy man, that Mashmool had gone of his own accord. And with respect to his excellence in music, he did not possess a monopoly of the art. If it were not for their sure knowledge of its being an empty, almost sinful pastime, they could no doubt learn to play any instrument as well and better than he. . . .

"Hearts absorbed in the contemplation of the divine will cannot be corrupted by the arts that soothe and recreate," rejoined the saintly hermit, a faint smile enlivening his emaciated countenance.

Then he dismissed the brothers who, returning home, had a serious argument, evoked by this utterance as a sequel to his fuller explanation of his interpretation of the dream. Considering and reconsidering, it now appeared entirely clear to them: the rich reward for their righteousness, at last acknowledged by Batara Guru, was to arrive through the *apsara* dancing to their music; and all their religious scruples anent the propriety of that frivolous diversion vanished the moment they saw their advantage in it.

Bagal commenced practising the *rabab*,¹ Sompoq the *gendang*² and Paning the *katram*³ in order to form a complete orchestra, by far more sonorous and melodious, more adequate to accompany a celestial dancer, they flattered themselves, than Mashmool's feeble efforts with a simple bamboo flute ever could be. After persistent and strenuous toil they noticed slight movements in the puppet. It began to quake and quiver; with their progress in the production of a concordant combination from the sounds they generated, to change its posture and position at the measure of the tune to which they strove to do justice. The achievement put an end to the scoffing of their neighbors who, compelled by curiosity, sought their company for ocular evidence of their prodigious command over a wooden image into which they had blown life, causing it to go through its paces as if it were a real dancing-girl.

The neighbors were, of course, made to pay for the privilege. Sry Nagasary's monetary value expelled from the minds of the brothers all doubts of her divine mission to recompense them for their holiness, tardily but now fitly recognized by Batara Guru. This was the rich reward foretold by the saintly hermit, which flowed more and more richly as their proficiency in handling their musical instruments increased, to wit, their mechanical proficiency, always short of the artistic touch born from an inspiration intrinsically foreign to their coarse-grained temperament. And this was the reason, but they knew it not, why Sry Nagasary, instead of budding into life, remained a marionette with lips always sealed; set, truly, in machine-like motion by their music such as it was, but stark again the instant it ceased.

Even though they prospered, thanks to the *apsara*'s offices, the brothers began to mistrust her lack of animation unless specially roused to activity. Constitutionally suspicious and spiteful, they also mistrusted one another, each meditating in his mind how he could become her sole possessor, secure for himself alone the rich reward by releasing the aerial nymph from her wooden prison and marrying her. Surely, Batara Guru had decreed her transmigration into an earthly shape for the highest good. And was not the highest good attainable in this case that the rich reward should go to the most meritorious, the most godly of the three as each of them believed himself to be?

For ways and means the saintly hermit could be consulted. So once more they went up to him; not together, however, but separately and secretly, in fear of being caught at their knavish game, turning on

¹ A primitive violin or, rather, a small violoncello, because when played, it is not held up but down, resting on the ground.

² A sort of drum, made of a piece of *nangka* wood and hollowed out, both sides being covered with a goat-skin or sheep-skin.

³ Cymbals.

their heels at every few steps to keep their father's spirit off their track for Kyahy Taboos, angered in the narrow valley of death at their intent to cheat one another, might contrive to cross it with calamitous result. The saintly hermit showed not the least surprise at their coming and gave each the same answer to his request for advice, again faintly smiling as Bagal, Sompoq and Paning, to conceal their base motives, feigned an ardent solicitude for the ultimate fate of the wooden *apsara*, whose incarnation they said that they wished to compass for her own weal, namely, to insure her happiness in union with Batara Guru's chosen one.

"To fulfil her destiny and yours, according to Batara Guru's will," declared the saintly hermit, "your *apsara* needs a human soul to conclude in its human stage the divine labor enjoined on her. Whoever, with a clean heart and clean hands, gives his soul to her in token of his true love, shall have hers."

Having spoken these words to Bagal, Sompoq and Paning successively, the saintly hermit declined to tell them anything more.

They spent their days and nights in pondering the queer, puzzling recommendation that they should give their souls to Sry Nagasary. Uncertain how to act upon it and avoiding one another because burning with envy, they endeavored to despoil destiny of its secrets by communicating with soothsayers, whose divinations at the cost of incessant offerings on numberless altars to numberless gods, brought them not a step farther. When they met to join in their musical performances, necessary to induce the *apsara* to dance, it was no pleasure to them, rather a vexation, to observe her growing skill, which attracted to their house people from far and near, and made the treasure in their coffers swell. They got their gold and silver too dear, prospering at the expense of their tranquillity of mind for each of the three was constantly scheming how to defraud the others of that source of income and finally of lasting comfort to its exclusive possessor. Since they had to share their good fortune, it made them utterly miserable.

Meanwhile the fame of the dancing image had spread to distant lands. Mashmool, the youngest brother, heard it spoken of on his travels and also somewhat homesick notwithstanding his unpleasant experience, he resolved to go and see for himself. After many new adventures and subsisting on his minstrelsy during his journey back as he had done all the time, he arrived at last, tired and footsore, in his native village. It was evening and nobody recognized him because he had become taller of stature while his features, too, had undergone a change reflecting a wider knowledge of the world, a ripper insight which nevertheless abided by the guileless sincerity of his candid nature.

To reach his home he had either to cross the river in a boat or to skirt it upstream for quite a distance to pass over a bridge and return by the opposite bank. Standing near the water's edge, he looked at the rising ground on the other side, purple in the rays of the setting sun. Behind the first bend where, giving way to cultivated ground, the tangled mangroves ceased to fringe the stream, lay the house of his desire. In the growing darkness he saw many lights glimmering between the palms that masked its landing-place. Many more lights floated onward with the flood. They belonged to *sampans* and larger craft, *koleks* and *jukoongs*, all making for the luminous headland. Mashmool inquired of a man, just embarked and ready to push off, what was going on that the whole village, and strangers too, it seemed, were speeding toward the semblance of some palace of a thousand torches, transplanted from a fairy tale to reality.

"Whence comest thou?" asked the man. "Even the people that live beyond the stars know of Sry Nagasary and of her dancing every market day. Jump in if thou hast a wish to behold the marvelous lady, a runaway from Indra's paradise."

Eyeing Mashmool more closely as he did jump in, his flute in his hand and his violin under his arm, a Sumatra *rabab* he had learned to play when associating with the Rawas brethren of his guild, the man continued, voicing the misgivings naturally awakened by a strolling minstrel's appearance:

"That is, supposing thou possessest the wherewithal to satisfy the craving for lucre which dishonors the sons of Kyahy Taboos who exhibit the *apsara*. Thou, companion of the road, canst pander to their infamy with cash? If not, thy going up is bootless and unavailing fatigue."

"Verily, thy words lack wisdom," retorted Mashmool, pointing to his instruments. "Shall music be barred where dancing sways the night?"

"Thou speakest truth," assented the man, beginning to paddle. "And oh for the dancing there would be with the youngest son of Kyahy Taboos leading instead of Bagal, who draws his bow across the copper strings as if he were sawing wood, while Sompoq and Paning bang the drum and clank the cymbals like irate husbandmen in their rice-fields shooping off the birds. But Mashmool, where does he wander and what has happened to him since his shameless brothers turned him out?"

Mashmool had his reasons not yet to reveal his identity. His answers to the friendly but garrulous boatman's questions about the country he hailed from, his musical training, the object of his visit and so forth, were short and evasive. Aided by the tide, which was setting in, they soon rounded the point near the landing-place, beached

the boat and joined the crowd that sought admittance to the spacious hall where the performance was to be given. Originally open on three sides, it had been closed by means of screens of split bamboo between the pillars to prevent impecunious or penurious curiosity procuring gratification without pecuniary sacrifice. Over the outer gate, truly, was an inscription in large characters, a motto from the sacred books of ancient lore, extending a cordial welcome to friends, acquaintances and every one else who chose to enter, but Bagal, guarding the door, assisted by Sompoq and Paning, construed that greeting in a fashion which made their guests comment with wry faces upon words soft as butter proceeding from demons of avarice lurking in their hearts.

When Mashmool entered, paying them the gate-money, the brothers never suspected their father's preferred son they had wronged, in the travel-worn stranger questing admission. They took him for a wandering musician attracted by the renown of their marvellous pre-eminence in his art, which forced even inanimate objects to sympathetic obedience, and saluted him with the obligatory phrase in addressing visitors from foreign parts:

"Our gain is great, O bestower of favors! that thy voyage has not been impeded by the perils of the road."

"The gain is mine, O you on whom Batara Guru showers his blessings! and it is your favor I seek," answered Mashmool in a low tone not to let his voice betray him.

Thereupon Bagal ordered the servants to spread mats for the spectators to sit upon with due regard to their rank and station, lining three sides of the space, also covered with matting, which was reserved for the performing puppet. He himself with Sompoq and Paning took place on the fourth side, muttering prayers while in the middle incense was burned as an indispensable preliminary to the exhibition. Then, getting up from their crouched position, they pushed the wooden doll forward, Sry Nagasary, in the regulation dress of a dancing-girl: from her hips down she was clothed in a *kahin*, a garment of brocade wound round her middle and kept securely attached by the weight of its own graceful folds; her body was wrapped in the *kembèn*, a narrow strip of silk, encircling her upward to the armpits and held tight by passing the ends under its loops; a *pending*, that is, a golden girdle, fastened more firmly both *kahin* and *kembèn*; a *slendang* or scarf, stuck to right and left between the *pending* and her waist, completed her costume with a string of *melaty*¹ hanging down from her neck, and the *kerabu*,² bracelets and finger-rings which were the special admiration of her female beholders.

¹ A white, strongly odorous flower of the genus *Jasminum*.

² An ornament which consists of a small bar, inserted into the hole made for that purpose in the lobe of the ear and held in place by a small disk on the inside while on the outside a stud of gold or silver, often embossed with diamonds or other precious stones, is screwed on to it.

These could be heard but not seen behind the slatted shutters and screens of split bamboo through the interstices of which they watched over the heads of their squatted men-folk what was bechancing the aerial nymph despatched from heaven for their amusement. Their excited whispers subsided into a long-drawn "Ah!" as they perceived the first signs of animation in her hands and arms and visage, yellow with *boreh*,¹ when the three brothers, each coaxing his instrument into laborious discipline without minding the other two, began to attack the dancing music proper after an equally cacophonous prelude. Bagal, keeping his bow between his fingers as if manipulating a saw, to repeat the boatman's simile, worked the strings in an unsteady, painful manner of which his *rabab* complained loudly in screechy, chiding accents, like those of a testy old woman. Sompoq thwacked the drum, altogether independent of his lead, and Paning belabored the cymbals quasi-derisively of that shrill scolding, its strident sound going through interminable, monotonous, ill-executed variations of the attempted tune, wrangling with the jeering response of the *gendang's* bing-bang and the *katram's* click-clack, until at last by sheer reiteration of the invitation to dance, it persuaded Sry Nagasary to perform her *sembah*, the salutation expressive of her readiness to commence.

It was hailed with exclamations of unbounded, though, owing to the awe attending her astounding feats, of suppressed enthusiasm. While, with clumsy movements like those of an automaton, she took hold of her scarf, disengaging it from her girdle to raise it to her shoulders, putting it round her neck with the ends hanging down to her knees, Bagal, as leader of the orchestra, redoubled his vigor. Without prejudice on behalf of key or melody or harmony, he dispensed his fortes in an audaciously liberal style, goading Sompoq and Paning to surpass his energetic zeal with vicious fortissimos on *their* instruments, the three producing a combination of dissonants which gave an alarming foretaste of the futurist music that enraptures ultra-modern audiences in our Temples of Symphony and Philharmonic Halls.

Sry Nagasary made the best of it. Dancing slowly and mechanically, she warmed up to her divine art — that is, to a certain extent, to the extent permitted by the character of her accompaniment. Her stolid face, indeed, smeared with *boreh*, had nothing human, still less anything indicative of her heavenly extraction, yet, first the women and then the men remarked that her eyes, as she glided round, languidly lifting and twisting her arms and hands and fingers, began to move in her head. They moved sleepily, though, like the eyes of one acting under the impulse of a dream. . . . But lo! her hair — it had

¹ A preparation of curcuma and cocos oil, used at ceremonial functions to anoint and color the parts of the body which remain bare.

become real hair and in it was stuck a leaf of the *waringin*-tree,¹ just as if she were a common dancing-girl, performing in the street and desirous to attract lovers. . . .

Encouraged by these familiar associations, the chief of the village, who attended *ex officio*, got up and took Sry Nagasary's scarf from her clumsily fumbling hands. Thereupon, followed by the tottering doll, he approached with the mincing steps prescribed by native etiquette his superior, the *demang* or chief of the district, also present, to squat down opposite the latter and to offer it as an invitation to the first dance *à deux*, an honor pertaining to the guest highest in rank. Again according to native etiquette there was a protracted contest of courtesy between the two officials, the one insisting with due deference, the other politely refusing to accept the scarf until at last he yielded and, begging to be excused on account of his age while handing it back to the wooden lady, produced a silver coin, tendering the money to her as the price of his exemption from a precedence incompatible with his hoary dignity.

"The proper thing to do," muttered the bystanders who watched Sry Nagasary clutching the coin with an awkward gesture and sliding by fits and starts, unconscious of her actions, toward a copper vessel in front of Bagal, into which she let it fall. The chinking sound of its striking the rim and bottom, displeased the women behind the shutters and screens. "An unmannerly dancing-girl," they whispered to one another, commenting upon this trick which, like the ostentatious display of a *waringin*-leaf, is a common one among the artists of the streets, who take good care to make the tangible evidence of approval, extracted from a male admirer, ring in its receptacle to stimulate the generosity of his rivals.

Moving away from the collection-bowl, Sry Nagasary halted before the village chief, whose turn had now come either to dance with her or to open his purse. He chose the former course, seconded by two of his elders, one to his right, the other to his left. Squirming about, contorting their limbs, encircling the unsightly image of a celestial virgin at the measureless measure of a wildly unharmonious orchestra, they presented a sight extravagantly weird and lugubrious in their *chassé-croisé* with the grotesque *apsara*, descended from Indra's court for the delectation of mortals. Although some of the onlookers enlivened the scene by clapping their thighs in time with the drum and cymbals, genially and affably to show the appreciation obligatory on well-bred neighbors, the pause, announced by an unearthly yelp of Bagal's *rabab*, was welcomed as a relief even by the most curious.

Sry Nagasary relapsed at once into her original state of superlative woodenness. Never before, however, had she done so well, danced

¹ The ficus *Benjaminea*.

in such a life-like style as that night. The three brothers took, of course, all the credit of her progress in pose and attitude and elegant carriage to themselves. But those of the company who had not been wholly absorbed in the spectacle because distracted by their close observation of the stranger in their midst, the wandering minstrel half hid in a corner with his eyes riveted on the dancing doll that seemed to gain in vitality under his gaze, were of a different opinion.

"He has the air of a *gandharva*¹ in search of his *apsara*: no wonder that she responds," said the women and girls, favorably impressed by the looks and deportment of the handsome youth.

"Is not this Mashmool, come back to claim his portion among the sons of Kyahy Taboos?" a selectman asked of the village scribe.

The accosted authority, whose wife had nursed Mashmool after the death of his mother in childbed, scrutinized him closely and cried:

"Indeed it is and my hearty greeting to him!"

The exclamation and the crowding forward of the villagers to salute the wanderer happily restored to his friends, awakened his brothers to a sense of something unusual going on, an event not on the evening's programme. Joining the circle which had formed around Mashmool, they now recognized him too, their preoccupation as owners, managers and orchestra of the show having so far prevented their taking much notice of him. His arrival did not suit them at all but they went up to him with sugary words and a grand display of joy at his return, and they entreated him to consider himself at home in their father's house, forgetting that it was his as well as theirs.

In their vexation at Mashmool's unexpected re-appearance, they solaced themselves with the thought that their generous but vague assurances of hospitable intent could easily be modified after they had had time to consider the case at their leisure, basing their line of conduct on mature reflection. For the present Sry Nagasary's resuscitation claimed their undivided attention. So they took up again their instruments to resume their arduous functions in the eagerly awaited second part of the performance. But, while they preluded with more than ordinary absence of concord and consonance, owing to their perturbed state of mind, the *demang*, after a whispered consultation with the village chief, interrupted their play and proposed an arrangement the idea of which had already occurred to several others: since Mashmool was known to be an excellent musician, could not Bagal leave the musical direction to him the better to discharge the duties of the general management?

Bagal argued that Sry Nagasary, being a personal gift from Batara Guru to himself and, he added under the stress of their presence, to

¹ The *gandharvas* are heavenly musicians who, with their wives or mistresses, the *apsaras* or heavenly dancers, live in the house of Indra, jointly beguiling his spare time.

his brothers Sompog and Paning, would most certainly decline to dance to any music but his own. One might try, answered the *demang*. His proposition in favor of the change being carried by acclamation, Bagal was obliged to give in and resign the leadership of the orchestra to Mashmool who, rejecting his elder brother's fiddle, commenced tuning the Sumatra *rabab* which he had learned to play during his peregrinations in Jamby and the Rawas. Besides other differences in construction, it had three strings of twisted silk instead of the two copper ones which Bagal never succeeded in stretching properly to sound the right notes of the *salendro*-octave. Mashmool's prelude revealed at once his indisputable superiority as an apt pupil of the eminent virtuoso that made Batang Asay, where this maestro had established a school, a name famous among the connoisseurs from Majapahit to Manang Kabau.

The coarse, raw noises, suggestive of an abusive hag, a shrieking virago, which Bagal had inflicted upon his audience, gave way to soft tones like those of a love-sick maiden whose hopes and desires are bursting into song. Mashmool's masterly execution of the opening strains profoundly touched the cloistered women and girls who, for all his having been recognized as Kyahy Taboos's youngest son, could not get rid of the fanciful belief that the wandering minstrel was an incarnation of the primal and essential Gandharva, the patron of their sex, the deity of courtship and marriage. His tender call to come forth and dance, a gentle but irresistible summons to the completion of high events, had a still more wonderful effect upon the *apsara*, manifestly so anxious to do his bidding that it almost petrified Bagal, who sat motionless with mingled feelings of amazement and exasperation while Sompog and Paning, no less confounded, fortunately forgot to follow their younger brother's lead with their drum and cymbals.

In fact, every one doubted the evidence of his senses when Sry Nagasary stepped airily to the middle of the space assigned for the exhibition of her art, subject to a transformation unlike and much greater than that which had enabled the lumbering doll, fashioned by Bagal and dressed and bedecked with jewels by Sompog and Paning, to go through its twitching paces. Her features took a living hue; the layer of *boreh* disappeared from her face and arms and hands, leaving them tinted like the dusky-yellow rind of the succulent *langsah*.¹ The life-blood, vital principle of human existence, rushed up from its source beneath the lotus and tinged her cheeks; her bosom heaved; her brow expanded; her lustreless eyes began to sparkle; the *waringin*-leaf in her hair-knot blossomed into a red-glowing rose.

Nimble, yet stately, she danced to the measure of Mashmool's accords, swaying her lithe body on her haunches, extending and

¹ A fruit, variety of the *duku*, family *Meliacea*.

bending upward her fingers, spreading and waving her scarf with winding, graceful movements. Timidly advancing, shyly receding, she seemed to hold converse with the all-spirit, wooing its creative essence and being wooed, trembling under unseen caresses, mellowed to conceive and bear like a flower-bud in the warmth of the sun. How beautiful she was! And her dancing in agitation of ecstasy an elation of the soul, a solution of the riddle of man and woman, of the noble and the base, of heaven and earth!

The hearts of those who beheld her throbbed with rapture. They were now perfectly convinced that she was one of Indra's hand-maidens, her home the abode of the gods. And, miracle upon miracle, when she finished her dance with Mashmool's last note quavering skyward, she did not subside into the rigid inanity from which he had quickened her, but, after craving with a *sembah* and obtaining his permission to withdraw, disappeared into the women's apartments, bestowing on him a parting glance which made the young folks turn white, then scarlet under their brown skins as their tumultuous blood ceased its flow, immediately to dash on again through their veins in fiery waves. And one of the elders said:

"The *ghandarva* fully deserves his reward."

"Nay, call him Kama, the god of the flowery bow, smiled upon by Raty, his fond spouse," replied the village scribe, who was something of a prig.

The *demandang*, rising to depart after thanking Bagal for the rare entertainment provided and Mashmool for its exceptional success, gave the sign for the assembly to break up. The village chief followed suit, escorting him home at the head of a numerous retinue. Thereupon the rest of the guests dispersed in due sequence, taking a perfunctory leave of their host and his two brothers next in age, but very cordially commending themselves to the youngest and complimenting him upon the new proof of his surpassing talent they had just enjoyed. Mashmool accepted their praise with a modesty which endeared him still more, especially to the fair among his admirers. Yet, however unassuming his behavior, this homage to his musical proficiency, not to mention Sry Nagasary's evident preference for his person and accompaniment, was not at all to his seniors' liking. On the other hand, they saw their advantage in retaining him until they had mastered the trick, for so they considered it, which wrought the magical transition of a wooden image into an embodiment of the transports of paradise, far beyond their own past achievements unaided by occult artifice.

So they, too, complimented him, feigning to be overjoyed at his return, cajoling him, beseeching him to stay and live with them forever but resolved in their minds to get rid of him the instant they had wheedled him out of his secret. They ordered the servants to spread

a sleeping-mat for him in the verandah over the stream that laved the basement of the house, his favorite place to pass the night in as they affectionately remembered. Without doubt he was tired and they needed also a good rest after the fatigue of the night's performance, wherefore they begged him to excuse them for the nonce from expatiating upon their contentment caused by his hale and hearty presence, from exchanging the news of the village for an account of his travels and adventures: the morrow would bring time for that together with the festive celebration of his restitution to the parental roof.

Meanwhile they were consumed with a desire to see Sry Nagasary in the flesh as she withdrew from the dance, to speak to her privately, to establish their claims on the promised reward, each for himself to the exclusion of the other two. But at the women's quarters they were told in reply to their sly inquiries, that the lady had gone to the river for a bath, as might have been expected from an *apsara*, a water-nymph reincarnate; that she had imperiously commanded when retiring for repose after the refreshing expedition, on no pretext to suffer any one to annoy her with requests for an interview, least of all Bagal, Sompoq or Paning.

Mashmool, believing in his brothers' fond protestations, had laid himself down upon his sleeping-mat, thinking of the strange events of the day, of the ungainly wooden doll transfigured by the effective energy of his music into a celestial princess, of the fervid glance that lovely, peerless being had shot at him, grateful for her delivery, promising worlds of joy. It made him inexpressibly happy, gave him a feeling of beatitude that mingled in the surrounding darkness with the blissful smell of the juicy herbs of the pasture grounds and the sappy buds of the sprouting trees in the jungle, carried from far inland on the wings of the cooling mountain breeze. The growing stillness disposed him to slumber but his rest was not untroubled.

Tossing about, Mashmool was dreaming of the *apsara*, whom he fancied at his side, leaning over him and looking at him with eyes that plucked his heart out of his body, when a stronger scent, a scent of flowers, delicious and exciting, woke him up. The scent came from *melaty* and *champaca*,¹ strung profusely in the thick coils of her hair from which now the rose had vanished as, earlier in the evening, the *waringin*-leaf. Sitting up, fully awakened by the emotion produced by her close proximity, Mashmool saw however nothing, though he heard a faint rustle of flowing robes, soon lost in the gurgle of the water that swirled past beneath his feet. Had she come to him, the spirit of divine delight, Sry Nagasary? Or had it been one of the comely shaped witches that prowl by night to tear open the breasts of men in search of the clotted drop of blood?

¹ A flower of the family *Magnolia*, scarcely less odorous than the *melaty*.

Whoever or whatever it might have been, Mashmool resolved to watch for a new manifestation, surveying the black, eddying current, trying to pierce the murky wall of river and cloud blurred together, that closed him in. Wrapped in his *sarong*,¹ he sat quite still, noting every suspicious ticking and creaking of rafters and flooring, every shuffle of unshod feet he discerned moving in the house between the whirl of fluttering bats and the yelping bark of the wild dogs that were snapping at one another over the carrion thrown up by the tide. Nervously vigilant he sat until the first glimmer of the rising moon, blinking through the thin, flying filaments of vapor that detached themselves from the heavy mist which rested on land and sea, began to disperse the gloom. Then he took his flute and played a piece in laud of the soft, silvery light, so melodious that the occupants of the women's quarters, from mistress to lowest serving wench, spoke the next morning of heavenly lutes they had heard.

And his heart being full, Mashmool laid aside his flute to address himself to the moon in verses of the kind whose metre, in the guise of an eagle, once mounted to the realm of sublime felicity and stole the celestial liquor *soma*, lulling its guardian to neglectful sleep. And having done his duty by the benign luminary, Mashmool gave vent to the love he felt in him for Sry Nagasary and he sang:

"My lady is like the yolk of the egg of the world:
She is the cause and the aim of all that exists;
Of her true lover's anguish and bliss for ever and ever,
Of the pain he exultantly bears for her sake."

No more time elapsed than necessary to sheathe a kris, when a voice responded, a voice sweet as honey and distinct as the tones of Vishnu's conch that stirs creation from its crest to its navel at his passing astride on the bird Garuda:

"Through trials and suff'ring prepare to enter thy kingdom:
Man's strength's steel'd by patience and man's love by delay.
Is not the air clearèd and cleansèd by thunder and lightning?
Steadily chase thy desire by night and by day."

Mashmool had wooed and won the *apsara* without the assistance of the saintly hermit, and deep silence, the mysterious silence of the hours before dawn ushers the work and battle of mortal existence, confirmed the announcement of her conditional surrender.

The incident did not escape the attention of the brothers who, stung by the *apsara's* refusal to see them, were spying on her to keep track of further developments. Though the more jealous of one another the

¹ A garment which is worn by men as well as by women and consists of a long piece of cloth, sometimes of fine texture and elaborate design.

more beautiful she had become and the more accomplished in her profitable art without collapsing the moment she lost the spur of musical incitement, they dropped their rivalry to unite in their common envy of Mashmool. Their backs hunched up and their livers burst of hatred at her response to his declaration, the first articulate utterance that proceeded from her lips in their hearing, and such an utterance!

"We have labored," said Bagal, "and his is the gain!"

"We have admitted him to our home, him who came as driftwood," added Sompoq, "and extended our hospitality to him and this is how he repays our kindness, licking up the mead poured out for us by the gods."

"He has brought with him a spirit of evil, his master," continued Paning, "the one that taught him those tricks, and benefactions to the wicked are always punished by the gods, adverse as they must needs be to dealings with devils and the children of their wrath."

So they talked, wicked words leaving their mouths, sinful words suggested by the spirits of evil that lived in themselves who could not apprehend the fact of Mashmool's superior power over the heavenly nymph originating simply in his superior musical skill backed by his superior cast of mind. Acting on the prognostics of Bagal's dream, as interpreted by the saintly hermit, and competing for the promised reward, they had prepared for everything except that which now had happened. To obviate its consequences, they resolved upon the sacrifice of a human life — and whose life could it be but Mashmool's? — first to frighten his demonic master into revealing to them the coveted secret; secondly to serve the gods, notably Batara Guru, whose evident will it was that the *apsara's* mission should redound to their advantage, not his. Dreadful deeds are sometimes planned and done in the professed service of the gods!

Mashmool was asleep after his amorous vigil. Having ascertained this, the conspirators armed themselves and stealthily entered the verandah over whose balustrade they hoped to cast him, when finished, into the river which, as they knew by experience, never gave back what had sunk, properly weighted, beneath its whirling surface to its slimy bottom. Mashmool's regular breathing augured well for their undertaking. But suddenly, already near his sleeping-mat and reaching for their krisses, their fratricidal hands were arrested by an apparition, luminous in the moonglade. Startled, they drew back. Sry Nagasary, premonished by her divine perception, had come to warn them off and they went, turning tail like beaten dogs, yet self-righteous enough, even in the hour of their discomfiture and repudiation, to make one another believe that it was they who renounced her since they detected their danger: do not the gods when the holy practices of sanctified men threaten damage to their pre-eminence, employ *apsaras* to lure those

saints from the blessed road? Enlightened by the happenings of the night, they would abstain.

When the mean, by far too crafty fools had gone, withering under her contemptuous stare, Sry Nagasary stooped and touched Mashmool's forehead. He woke up a second time and, looking around, unquiet as a budding plant stirred by the longings of spring, he saw now plainly before him the earthly form of her who had become a dweller in his heart. Bending toward him her dainty figure that seemed wrought of the sheen of the waning moon, she carried her clean beauty proudly as a regal garment. Perplexed and afraid to speak to one descended from the highest sphere to expose herself to contact with mortals, ordained for a purpose he could not divine, to disport among them as she was wont to do among the gods, he gazed at her in silence, intoxicated by the blithesome influence of her personality, the very marrow of love.

"Thy singing has moved me strangely," she said. "Hast thou the strength to be mine?"

"Forgive me," he answered. "I forgot myself: thou belongest to my brothers and my manifest duty is to go."

"Thy brothers are a rottenness at the core of the sanctity they pretend. They sham devotion, disturbing its limpid course, stirring up its dregs and besmirching themselves. Indra's thunderbolt will destroy them: Rudra, the blue-black demon, is already tracing their path. But, by the light of the moon! I have a more important matter in hand than to discuss thy brothers' share in my assuming this shape, which will confound them through their rascal stupidity. Therefore again: Hast thou the strength to be mine; mine in my master's palace of Amaravati, in the fragrant gardens of Randana?"

Though his courage never turned away from a legitimate object, Mashmool repeated that he would resume his wanderings rather than contend with his brothers for a treasure he prized above all but considered theirs. Thereupon Sry Nagasary, unfolding their machinations and disclosing their intention to kill him, as a king's messenger unwraps a royal despatch from its yellow silken cover and discloses its contents, told him of their frustrated attempt on his life, adding that their fate, whatever he might wish or do, was in the hands of Varuna, the god of justice and punishment. This having dissipated his scruples, he gladly confessed his love and declared his readiness to prove it by performing any task she might be pleased to appoint.

Her answer fed the lurking suspicion always associated with the unexpected fulfilment of a strong desire:

"My home is in heaven and, though the celestial beverage of delight I dispense, can be drunk by gods or by men at Batara Guru's discretion, the privileged mortal has to select between earthly marriage,

which is a short, counterfeit happiness, and lasting felicity in *svarloka*, the palace and gardens of eternal bliss, which to gain requires fortitude and continence and high endeavor while traversing the valley of sorrow. It is in thy choice to abase me, an *apsara*, to thy own uncleaned condition, or to raise thyself to mine as a *gandharva*, my consort before the throne, a servant of Agni, the effulgent, and of Varuna, the exalted judge. Choose thy destiny for me to follow!"

Flurried by the alternative and impelled by the rash impatience that marks the hot lover, Mashmool had it on the tip of his tongue to beg her consent for immediate espousal, but the knowledge of its brief, incomplete satisfaction marred the tempting picture of undeferred possession as the shadow of a cloud darkens a sun-lit landscape. He stood motionless: gratification of the sin-ridden flesh for a fleeting hour or the soul's reward in undecaying beatitude, the real treasure in Sry Nagasary's gift?

Dawn had now arrived, Ushas, the shimmer of new-born day, sweethearting with the streaks of vapor in the sky, turning their complexion from palest pink to deepest carmine, and the celestial virgin took her bridegroom by the hand, leading him out of the house to the riverside. There she held back and spoke:

"Look, the moon, the lady of fecundity under whose influence Indra created the universe and fixed the orbits of the planets, Soma, restored to her dominion, is drunk up by the gods; she waneth and will not be filled ere I return to my place on high. What is thy choice? Which way shall we travel, either together for a little while, constantly menaced by irrevocable separation as between a mortal and a child of the stars; or apart for a little while, thou undoing thy desire of its low, lustful wrappings to let me precede where, after trial and purification in the accomplishment of thy task, thou shalt become my other self among the diamonds that stud the roof of the world?"

Loaded with the perfumes of burgeoning woods, the landwind rippled the water whose playful wavelets rocked the coco-nut shells which the girls of the village, praying to Soma, had filled with sweetmeats and sent floating down the stream to dispose to favor the deity in charge of the matrimonial market.

The passing fisher-folk as they steered their boats seaward before the auspicious breeze, and the husbandmen as they made up to plough their rice-fields and saw them standing, Mashmool and Sry Nagasary, silhouetted against the amber and garnet welkin, in earnest, affectionate communion, said:

"Lo! the *apsara* has found her *gandharva*."

From afar they were watched by the saintly hermit, who had been drawn from his holy meditations by the rapidly spreading news of Sry Nagasary's release from bondage by the charm of Mashmool's

enchanting melodies, and was curious to know whether the youngest of the sons of Kyahy Taboos, conquering himself, would reap the rich reward Batara Guru had empowered the *apsara* to bestow on the most deserving.

"Oh she," he muttered, "she, the cloud-spirit, groping in her deliverance for the liberation of her lover from the thralldom of carnal appetite, will she attain her wish and elevate him to glory?"

Mashmool seemed to hesitate. Anxious for a token, he scanned the horizon to the North where Kubera, the god of worldly indulgence, keeps his court, and to the North-East where Chandra illuminates the joys of paradise.

"Thou, Surya, direct his decision!" pleaded Sry Nagasary, invoking the sun, which began to climb the firmament in his golden chariot behind his milk-white, lucent horses.

At his advent Mashmool obtained the inspiration he had sought. And Surya soon reigning supreme, Mashmool loudly published his choice, erect on the ridge at the river's edge, gorgeously clothed in the lord of fruition's reflected radiance as in shining armor, clenching shining weapons, put in his hands by the resplendent god: a flaming sword to strike at error and deceit, a lance with flashing head to drive back falsehood into slanderous throats, the minstrel having enlisted as a warrior in Batara Guru's army of the upright.

And Sry Nagasary contemplated him contentedly, fain to ascend whence she had come, going before with a cheery word of trust in a speedy consummation of their union; with a prayer in her heart for its perfection in purity, such a prayer as no god can resist: May my soul be his soul as his soul is my soul, one forever in whole, undying troth!